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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3917  
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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1411  
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND 0415  
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0824  
RHJMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000200

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2017

TAGS: ASEC AMGT PREL MARR FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI INTERIM PM REQUESTS EMBASSY TO REMOVE STREET  
BARRIERS -- URGENT ACTION REQUEST

REF: A. SUVA 158

- 1B. SUVA 193
- 1C. STATE 4166
- 1D. SUVA 195

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D)

Summary

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11. (C) Fiji interim PM Bainimarama has, via dipnote, requested Embassy Suva to remove vehicle barriers from the street in front of the chancery by this Friday, April 13. The barriers have been in place since the East Africa bombings in 1998. Without the barriers, the chancery has no setback from a central-city street. Presumably pique over USG sanctions following the December coup has motivated the move, though the dipnote refers only to an effort to return Suva to "normalcy." This follows a dipnote that denied diplomatic status to Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) overseers for the Suva new embassy compound (NEC) per refs A-D. We seek immediate Washington guidance on a response re the barriers, ideally prior to a meeting at 0900 tomorrow (Tues. 4/10 at 5 p.m. EDT) between EAP DAS Davies and the Fiji interim Foreign Minister. End summary.

Text of Fiji dipnote

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12. (U) The Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs faxed Embassy Suva a diplomatic note No. 178/07 dated 5 April 2007. The text is as follows:

(complimentary opening)...and has the honor to inform the latter of the Government of the Republic of the Fiji Island Interim Prime Minister's request to have the security barriers installed in Loftus Street removed by Friday, 13 April, 2007.

The request is in line with the recent removal of military personnel from checkpoints to allow for a freer movement of people which is also part of the Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands effort to return the country to normalcy.

The Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands do not see any security breach or threat if the security barriers on Loftus Street were to be removed, consequently will only allow for a freer movement of people and traffic.  
(complimentary closing).

Note: The MFA fax was sent at 6 p.m. Thursday, April 5, after Embassy Suva's mail room had closed for the four-day Easter weekend. We first saw it at OOB Tuesday, April 10.

A bit of history: no set-back

¶3. (C) Embassy Suva installed security barriers at both ends of Loftus Street, which runs across the front of the embassy's rented chancery property, in August 1998, just after the East Africa embassy bombings. The chancery has no set-back at all from the street, which is in central Suva and before installation of the barriers saw frequent city traffic. At the time, Fiji MFA and the Suva City Council (which actually controls the street) gave authorization. Elements in Fiji have expressed frustration about the street on occasion, but this is the first time, to our knowledge, that the Fiji Government has attempted to withdraw its assent to the closure. With plans for a new U.S. embassy compound (NEC), tentatively to be completed at a different location in early 2009, there seemed to be willingness to wait for the embassy move before re-opening the street. That said, the Qarase Government in 2005 stopped the UK High Commission from constructing security barriers to protect its chancery on the basis that the threat was low and the inconvenience to traffic would be high.

Motivation: unhappiness with U.S. sanctions

¶4. (C) We presume the motivation for the "request" is pique at USG sanctions after last December's coup, including restrictions on military assistance and visa sanctions. Embassy consular phone calls and official letters to visa holders affected by the sanctions went out two weeks ago. Interim PM (and Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama) has complained publicly about the negative effect the visa sanctions have on the interim government's ability to "return Fiji to normalcy." Similar pique may explain MFA's recent decision not to authorize

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diplomatic status for Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) personnel who are to oversee the NEC (refs A, B, C, and D). We are lobbying for reconsideration of that decision, since OBO is not prepared to undertake NEC construction if its employees lack diplomatic status.

A worry about terrorism

¶5. (C) From our security perspective, a "freer movement of people and traffic" on Loftus Street will increase the danger that a terrorist will build a car bomb here. We have no current knowledge of any specific terrorist threat in Fiji. There is a local Muslim community, but it tends to be apolitical. The military government's visible presence dampened criminal tendencies on the streets immediately after the coup, but police instead of soldiers are now manning checkpoints. The future crime trend is unclear. In any case, Fiji is a regional transport hub with porous borders, and plausibly Suva could be a Bali for terrorists. That was a major motivation for the NEC plans, to free the embassy from a situation in which at any time the Fiji Government could re-open the street and eliminate set-back. The double whammy of NEC uncertainty, because of the diplomatic status problem for OBO employees, and the notice to re-open the street creates an instant security vulnerability with the possibility of no long-term solution.

Immediate Action request

¶6. (C) EAP DAS Glyn Davies is to arrive Suva early tomorrow (April 11) and is to have meetings with interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau and interim Finance Minister Chaudhry beginning at 9 a.m. (5 p.m. EDT April 10). We are told a request for a meeting with Bainimarama has been turned down. The MFA meeting is an opportunity to convey Washington points regarding embassy security. We cannot claim that the terrorist threat in Suva is immediately high; we can state with assurance that reopening Loftus Street will increase the embassy's vulnerability. We see that as a very bad idea. Please advise.

DINGER